Poetry, Power, and Politics on the Roof of the World

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Poetry, Power, and Politics on the Roof of the World

Teaching in an international setting offers opportunities to exchange the familiar and predictable for the unexpected. It is the surprises, the unforeseen challenges, the startling and serendipitous moments of discovery that remain for me the most memorable features of teaching abroad. These are also the experiences from which I have learned the most and which have most often underscored my fundamental kinship with the people and cultures I’ve come to know and respect beyond my customary habitat. This was again true for me this past year as a Fulbright Fellow teaching in Nepal, a so-called third-world country, whose spectacular mountain ranges have earned it the title of “roof of the world.”

Immediately upon arriving in Kathmandu in April 2004, I underwent a detailed orientation at the American Embassy. The security warden gave me a long list of emergency numbers and sober reminders to keep a low profile, avoid travel in dangerous areas, stay away from political rallies, keep a safe distance from student demonstrations, and respect all city-wide bundhs (vehicular traffic strikes). As I left the embassy, it occurred to me that not one of my Tribhuvan University colleagues, in our e-mail correspondences prior to my arrival, had mentioned that the political climate was less than stable. Certainly I had been aware that King Gyanendra was at serious odds with the members of his parliament. And I had known that the Maoist insurgents were active in certain hill regions of Nepal. Yet, I was frankly amazed at the degree of political tension palpable and visible in the capital city of Kathmandu.

It didn't take me long to grasp why my well-intentioned academic counterparts in Kathmandu had not forewarned me. One, if I had had full knowledge of the political situation, I might have decided not to come. And two, what an American far from Kathmandu might consider fearful or threatening was routine and commonplace for my Nepalese colleagues, a daily condition they had learned to live with; they were confident that they could provide for me. And they did.

In spite of the uncertainties and dangers, my colleagues networks and informed me that the Tribhuvan University was impressively ambitious and highly creative in setting, to develop curricula and university administration members to work on literature and American studies to establish. It became clear for these professors (in this locked nation surrounded by India and China) and American literature stood as a goal by which to study personal dreams.

My Nepalese friends were ingenious in finding solutions. They cleverly spirited their motorcycles to hotspots, road barricades, demonstrations, to be moved to another meeting in an announcement ten miles to reach. Some mornings would discover the previous day’s meetings occurring in another city, but would leave a curfew. And curfews and traffic.

On several occasions, I would calm on the Tribhuvan (a place I had watched in fellowship there in 1988 to the view of the Himalayas, books in a quiet room, students, and to say animated young

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Teaching and Studying Internationally

Politics on Trial

Teaching and studying internationally offers opportunities for personal growth and a better understanding of the world. It also provides the unexpected and dramatic moments that come with the territory of living in a landlocked country. It was on one of those peaceful afternoons - the passion, the intensity of conviction expressed by those students claiming poetry as the grand dent readers whose heavily accented Newari, and Hindi to Pahori, Maithili, Sherpa-had planned to judge for a poetry contest. This proved to be no ordinary event. Thirty-eight students from the university's English Department-students whose first languages ranged from Nepali, Newari, and Hindi to Pahori, Maithili, and Sherpa—had planned to participate in this poetry contest. They cleverly spirited me around the city in taxis or on their motorcycles in ways that avoided demonstration hotspots, road barricades, and police lines. Some mornings while reading the local English papers (The Rising Nepal, The Kathmandu Post, The Nation), I would discover that we had met in a particular locale the previous day to avoid a demonstration that had been occurring in another part of the city. Throughout my stay, my Nepalese colleagues came often and cheerfully to my well-guarded home for marathon work sessions but would leave abruptly an hour before dusk to avoid curfews and traffic blockades.

On several occasions when the atmosphere was calm on the Tribhuvan University's Kirtipur campus (a place I had wandered freely during my teaching fellowship there in 1995), I was able to enjoy lunch with a view of the Himalayas towering in the distance, to read books in a quiet library carrel, to meet with graduate students, and to share sweet milky Nepalese tea with animated young women eager to converse about their studies. These peaceful, unrestricted days never seemed long enough, and I found myself increasingly adopting the Nepalese tendency to "seize the moment," because one could never be sure what tomorrow would bring in terms of power outages, water restrictions, downed phone and internet lines, or transportation strikes that limited food supplies in the markets as well as travel around the city.

It was on one of those peaceful days at the campus that I was unforgettably corralled into serving as a judge for a poetry contest. This proved to be no ordinary event. Thirty-eight students from the university's English Department-students whose first languages ranged from Nepali, Newari, and Hindi to Pahori, Maithili, and Sherpa—had planned to participate in this poetry contest. They cleverly spirited me around the city in taxis or on their motorcycles in ways that avoided demonstration hotspots, road barricades, and police lines. Some mornings while reading the local English papers (The Rising Nepal, The Kathmandu Post, The Nation), I would discover that we had met in a particular locale the previous day to avoid a demonstration that had been occurring in another part of the city. Throughout my stay, my Nepalese colleagues came often and cheerfully to my well-guarded home for marathon work sessions but would leave abruptly an hour before dusk to avoid curfews and traffic blockades.

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vehicle by which to voice their most heartfelt thoughts and longings, in order, as one of them claimed, “To use words to turn myself into fire and melt the ice.”

As might be expected, there were poems about family, home, love, and death. However, almost all of the poems reflected in some way on the political agitation and anguish traumatizing the nation, the fear that grips the heart when “the pigeon’s ability to circle fearlessly is lost” or when “abruptly the eagle grabs the dove.” As I listened to these brave young poets, it struck me that while mountain climbers and adventurers from around the world come to Nepal to scale its spectacular peaks and span its incomparable crevasses, the Nepalese themselves in countless villages and valleys throughout the country awaken daily to the challenge of enduring—or somehow surmounting—the threats, strikes, insurgencies, oppression, and poverty surrounding them.

On that particular day, I saw poetry bring welcome light and vision into a dank auditorium. Poetry became both constructive and transformative—a way to express what seemed nearly unspeakable and to give voice to the deepest concerns of individuals as well as a nation. Poetry had never seemed more alive than it did that afternoon on the roof of the world. That day, far from home and familiar faces, I felt enveloped by the strength of the human spirit and the power of poetry, and I felt I was standing on sacred ground.

Nicaragua: Perspective

This past summer I went to Nicaragua to participate in a program entitled “Threats to Nicaragua.” The program was divided into two parts. The first part was spent in the Valley studying sociology to help to explain some of the problems that traditionally go along with living for weeks we went to use. We stayed on a farm for two weeks and took a course on the subject of the classroom in Nicaragua. We saw how the towns and cities of Nicaragua have inequality at its edges.

The people of Nicaragua have many problems. They have been fighting for their lives for many years. Once they found themselves subjected to violence, in the shape of the dictator’s National Guard, with a string of rangers. Unemployment is a norm. They are faced with additional problems. They are faced with violence. They are faced with poverty. They must be paid back.

This could be the life for many Nicaraguans, yet they continue to work hard and fight for their own lives, as they have shown throughout our trip we visited. They have a great sense of what they are capable of achieving.

There is an organization called Pro Mujer, which was subjected to violence and has had to become financial. They have loaned money to businesses. They have helped women to become financial. They have loaned money to businesses. This is not only related to the inequality that exists in Nicaragua, but also to the inequality that persists in many countries.

We also visited an organization that was based in a community affected by Hurricane Mitch.